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Still Free, Still Alive: Images of Haitian Collective Values Portrayed Through Child Characters in Lamartine's *Toussaint Louverture* and Agnant's *Alexis d'Haïti*

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Haiti (then Saint-Domingue) became the first black republic in the world, founded on the will and spiritual force of rebellious African slaves who fought for their independence from Napoleon Bonaparte and the French empire. They were seized from their native African homelands and sold through the infamous Triangular Slave Trade to white colonists in Caribbean nations such as Saint-Domingue. Today, more than two hundred years after the country gained its independence, Haiti is one of the poorest and most turbulent countries in the world.

After breaking the chains of colonial oppression, Haiti's march towards true independence suffered a great setback in 1825 when France imposed a so-called "independence debt" of 150 million gold francs in order to recognize Haiti's independence. Almost a century after, in 1915, Haiti saw its territory once again invaded and occupied –this time by the United States—in the name of investments and national interests. Threats to American businesses, such as the Haitian-American Sugar Company, the instability of the U.S-supported government of Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam and the increasing popularity of anti-American leader Rosalvo Bobo at the time, were some of the reasons that triggered U.S. involvement in the island (Minster). The U.S. finally withdrew from the small island in 1934, but this did not mean the end of oppression for Haiti.

A new era of domestic-led terror arrived in 1964, when François "Papa Doc" Duvalier declared himself president-for-life. With the help of his brutal private militia, the Tonton Macoutes, he drove Haiti into the abyss of bloody dictatorship. It is estimated that the Tonton Macoutes killed over 60,000 of their own countrymen and women (BBC News). This triggered the massive exodus of Haitians, deemed at one point "boat people," into countries north of and in the Caribbean, including the United States, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic (Haggerty).

At the beginning of the 1990s, it seemed as though Haiti had embarked on the path to democracy with the first democratic elections, when Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president. Unfortunately, only one year later, Aristide was ousted in a coup d'état and the decade was marred by political turmoil and an unstable government. Aristide returned in 2000, but he was once again ousted in a popular uprising in 2004. Aristide was unable to deliver promises of economic improvement for the island. Furthermore, he also faced severe

opposition from domestic rebel groups as well as increased international pressure from the U.S. and France. In 2004, he "resigned under pressure" and sought exile in South Africa (BBC News). Aristide returned to Haiti in March 2011, days before run-off presidential elections.

In addition to political instability, Haiti has faced many problems resulting from natural disasters. During the first decade of the new millennium, Haiti saw its land punished by extreme food shortages, unprecedented hurricane seasons, a devastating earthquake that took the lives of over 300,000 in January 2010, and more recently a deadly cholera outbreak that killed more than 2,500 people (BBC News). Haiti's fight for existence and its journey toward independence have not been easy. In theory, Haiti is effectively "free" from the claws of European power; however, history and the ever-changing world order have not been kind to this Caribbean state. Since the country's independence, debt, political instability, and poverty have become the new forms of modern slavery.

Yet, despite all the obstacles and difficulties it has had to surmount, this small island and its perseverant people have managed to survive and perpetuate their identity for over two centuries. During the Haitian Revolution that lasted from 1791-1804, they were inspired and led by a courageous general named Toussaint Louverture. He was a freed slave who, after joining the ranks of the French army in 1794, was eventually able to gain command over a large part of the territory then known as Saint-Domingue. A strategic leader inspired by France's decision to abolish slavery, Louverture stood by the French army, while at the same time going through proper channels to cement the notion of equality under the law between blacks and whites. His patience and moderation were exhausted, however, when he saw that France intended to reestablish slavery in Saint-Domingue. By 1801, along with many of his men, Louverture had gained control of most of the island.

Later that same year, Napoleon ordered General Charles Leclerc and his troops to seize control of the island, but they did not succeed. Despite his inability to gain control of the small but powerful island, Napoleon was indeed able to seize Louverture and exile him to France, where the latter died in prison in 1803 (Biography.com). Despite his deportation, Louverture warned Napoleon not to underestimate the strength of his countrymen and women and famously declared: "In overthrowing me, you have done no more than cut down the trunk of the tree of the black liberty in Saint-Domingue, it will spring back from the roots, for they are numerous and deep." (Toussaint Louverture Historical Society). Louverture's principal lieutenant and loyal compatriot during the Revolution, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, was able to see the fruits of the Revolution sparked by his comrade. Saint-Domingue became independent in 1804, just one year after Louverture's death.

Powerful historical figures, such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, were stoic and astute leaders during the struggle for independence from the French empire. They personify the dignified fighting essence of the Haitian nation. The key Haitian values of true independence, a strong sense of community, and their genuine cultural identity, all found within the Haitian collective psyche, are expressed through Haiti's art and literature. The manifestation of these ideals is especially seen through symbolic characters that are oftentimes considered moral compasses or representations of everything that is good, true, and beautiful in the Haitian consciousness.

In this paper, I argue that the fundamental Haitian values of the struggle for freedom and the prevailing desire for independence are portrayed through the morals and personality

of two child characters found in texts set in Saint-Domingue/Haiti. The first character is a young girl named Adrienne in Alphonse de Lamartine's play *Toussaint Louverture* (1850) and the second is a young boy named Alexis in Marie-Célie Agnant's novel *Alexis d'Haiti* (1999). Through these two characters, Lamartine and Agnant depict Haiti's struggle to achieve freedom and to retain its unique cultural identity that has allowed this nation once called the "pearl of the Caribbean" to survive.

Children are often characters who represent key symbols of freedom, compassion, and a revolutionary spirit. In our consciousness, children represent the future and potential progress of entire nations. Thus, it follows that in the aforementioned texts treating historical and social circumstances in Haiti, child characters take an essential significance and are the principal acting force in the stories' most crucial events.

Before delving deeper into the stories, it is important to clarify certain facts about the authors of each work as well as the period in which they were published. *Toussaint Louverture*, by Alphonse de Lamartine, is a dramatic play that centers upon the life of Toussaint Louverture and his key role in the Haitian Revolution. Lamartine portrays the complex and sometimes strained relationships he had with his sons, the French army, his military comrades and his relationship with his niece Adrienne (a fictional character created by Lamartine). The play is described by Lamartine as "a boulevard play" designed to make historical events accessible to the public, but not necessarily pursuing a high literary regard (Hoffmann).

One important thing to mention about Alphonse de Lamartine is the fact that he is French, despite the fact that he wrote about the hero of the Haitian Revolution. Lamartine was born in Burgundy in 1790 and though he was a writer, he was also a very dedicated politician who was essential in the formation of the Second Republic. While active in the Second Republic, Lamartine led efforts to do away with both the death penalty and slavery in France, experiences which certainly must have influenced his perception and commitment to his play *Toussaint Louverture*.

At the beginning of the play in Act I, Scene I, slaves working in the sugarcane fields actively teach children the "Black Marseillaise." The "Marseillaise" is the French national anthem – its content reflects a violent call to arms to French citizens who must fight to achieve their revolutionary ideals of "freedom, equality and fraternity." In *Toussaint Louverture*, "The Black Marseillaise" is set to the same tune, but its content is different, focusing more on the idea of equality among races. It emphasizes unity and the desire for freedom, and it concludes by affirming that the ideal of equality with liberty will prevail in time: "Let us open our arms, free from chains, to the whites," the anthem concludes. "In the heart of all living blacks in humanity, it is an anthem of love and fraternity. Does blood have only one voice on Earth? Listen! And you, children, learn!"[1] says Samuel, one of the slaves in the story, and right after, he teaches the anthem to the group of children (Lamartine 14). The idea is to transmit not only the traditional tune, but the intrinsic values found within it, onto the children. In turn, the children are fascinated to learn the song.

When compared to the original, "The Black Marseillaise" is different in tone and in essence. The values in its message focus on the idea of humanity and community, especially expressed through the desire to be free but at the same time, being able to offer open arms to

[1] My translation from the original French, « Au cœur de tous les noirs soufflant l'humanité, c'est un hymne d'amour et de fraternité. Le sang a-t-il donc seule une voix sur la terre ? Écoute ! et vous, enfants, retenez ! »

the whites: a dignified liberty, free from grudges or retaliation. "The Black Marseillaise" is pacifist and contrastingly less violent than its French counterpart, thus constituting an indication of the kind of values that the adult characters in the play want the children to embrace as their own.

There is a clear assumption that children will be responsible for "retaining" and perpetuating patriotic identity, as well as the notion of true freedom in their incipient nation. In this scene, the mesmerized children are the symbol of collective Haitian national pride, depicted as a completely natural occurrence among the young citizens of a dignified nation. It is also in this scene where the reader is introduced to the character of Adrienne, who is present among the children.

In the ninth scene of Act II, Adrienne's key role starts to emerge when Toussaint asks her a series of questions concerning her race, her pride, and her willingness to sacrifice herself in the name of her country's independence. "Do you love your country ? […] To death ?"[2] asks Toussaint. Adrienne responds, "My uncle and my country, aren't they the same thing? Aren't you, for me, what comprises it all? Do I have any country other than the shadow of your steps?"[3] (Lamartine 55). In these lines, Adrienne reveals that her love for her country is as intense and as important as her love for her uncle, her principal father-figure in this play. Yet, when Toussaint says "But if I told you, 'Go alone, I am sending you to die for all blacks,'"[4] we see Adrienne's true commitment to her country and to her uncle's fight for independence. She responds: "I would gladly go! Wherever you would tell me, my uncle, I would go!"[5] (Lamartine 55). Adrienne's words in this scene are very significant to Toussaint's actions and leadership role in the play because he regards her as his guide, his inspiration, and his "lamp" on the path towards independence. Her dedication to her uncle's fight for the liberty of their people is as strong as Toussaint's devotion to seeing a bright future for his country – a future exemplified in his young niece.

Like Alphonse de Lamartine, Marie-Célie Agnant also portrays the struggle for freedom in many of her works. Agnant is a contemporary Haitian writer who focuses on the condition of women, race, memory, exclusion and exile, among other issues. These themes are personal for Agnant, as she was born in 1953 and grew up during the American occupation and François Duvalier's regime (Pierre). She emigrated to Québec in the 1970s, and her novel *Alexis d'Haïti* depicts a similar intensity in the pride of being Haitian through the character of Alexis. Agnant's story portrays a young boy, Alexis, who is faced with the difficult decision of having to leave his country with his mother due to political persecution.

Early in the narrative, the reader finds out that Alexis's father has "disappeared" –presumably kidnapped by paramilitary militias, due to his political points of view. This is a direct parallel to the reality that many Haitians, including Agnant, had to endure during the era of Duvalier dictatorships in the 20th century. Agnant, coming from an "unequivocally" anti-Duvalier family, was confronted with this experience at the age of 15 and was forced to leave her homeland for a more stable and safer future in Québec. "At that time, it was almost a matter of life and death. We didn't ask ourselves 'Should we leave?' but instead, 'When are

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[2] My translation from the original French, « Aimes-tu ton pays ? […] Mais jusqu'à la mort ? »

[3] My translation from the original French, « Mon oncle et mon pays, n'est-ce pas la même chose ? N'êtes vous pas pour moi tout ce qui le compose ? Ai-je un autre pays que l'ombre de vos pas ? »

[4] My translation from the original French, « Mais si je te disais, 'Va, seule, je t'envoie mourir pour tous les noirs ? »

[5] My translation from the original French, « J'irais avec joie ! Partout où vous diriez, oui, mon oncle, j'irais ! »

we leaving?'"[6] Agnant said in an interview, retelling of the horror brought on Haiti by these iron-fisted dictatorships, which drove tens of thousands of Haitians into exile (Proulx).

Alexis's mother, obviously worried about the future and safety of her son, makes the decision to brave the 650 miles at sea to try to build a new life in the United States. Though the decision has already been made and is out of his control, Alexis's heart and head are reeling with thoughts concerning the new reality he will face, how he will react to it, as well as how his sense of patriotic pride and his genuine cultural identity may be affected by this life changing event.

Just before traveling to the United States, Alexis talks to his grandmother, Malena, and expresses how he feels regarding the unfortunate circumstances of his forced exile. "When one leaves his or her country, all of a sudden, one can meet others who are gloomy, but they are not ours, one cannot recognize them […] Those who leave never return and, after some time, they don't know who they are anymore"[7] (Agnant 55). Alexis's patriotic spirit is not as explicit as Adrienne's, yet it is evident in this statement that Alexis has a deep, implicit Haitian pride and he does not want to lose his essence or his identity due to forced exile.

Alexis does not want to become "lost at sea," as he sails away from his homeland in a boat bound for the United States. He fears that the longer he lives there, the more detached he will become from his own country and identity. As is the case with most first-generation Haitian immigrants who settle in the United States, one of Alexis's greatest fears is losing his national identity or betraying his own roots by assimilating into the new host culture. In her essay *Juggling with Two cultures: Transnationalism and Hybridity as Cultural Outcomes of Immigration for Haitians in the United States*, Flore Zéphir says that many first-generation Haitian immigrants who settle in the United States do not give up their strong sense of nationality as *Haitians* easily. As soon as they realize the racial issues surrounding Black Americans, "who […] are placed at the bottom of the totem pole in American society", Haitians typically refuse to accept this discrimination typically associated with being black in the United States. Zéphir explains:

> This placement [at the bottom] is in direct conflict with the Haitian definition of Blackness, which is synonymous with pride and unflinching independence. Their race is a symbol of a glorious past, that of a revolution that led to freedom, nationhood and equality with Whites. (Zéphir 67)

Alexis's reluctance to assimilate and his genuine fear of losing his identity during his forced exile reflects the inherent value of national pride that lives on in the Haitian spirit. To him, like the many immigrants in the United States today, retaining his identity intact is a way to carry on the legacy of revolutionary struggle and the conquest of freedom evident in Haiti's remarkable history. These assertions are exemplified in Alexis's character: to come from a past of rebellion, from a nation that literally broke the chains of slavery and colonialism as it became an independent state, in short, to be Haitian, is synonymous with an ever present desire for freedom and equality.

In Agnant's novel, Alexis's friend Jérémie talks about how his uncle who lives in the

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[6] My translation from the original French « A cette époque-la, c'était presqu'une question de vie ou de mort. On ne disait même pas "est-ce que l'on part?, " mais plutôt "quand est-ce que l'on part? »

[7] My translation from the original French, « Quand on quitte son pays, dans un débit saccadé, on peut rencontrer d'autres mornes, mais ce ne sont pas les nôtres, on ne sait pas les reconnaître […] Ceux qui partent ne reviennent jamais et, au bout d'un certain temps, ils ne savent plus qui ils sont vraiment »

United States has become unrecognizable and surly. He is afraid that Alexis will end up the same way. Jérémie's pessimistic tone inherently connects assimilation into a host culture with the betrayal of one's own. Jérémie says: "He spoke a strange language. It wasn't Creole, but instead, a mélange that nobody understood […] he would ask: 'watere, watere'. We had shown him the cabin at the end of the courtyard, I mean, the latrines. He kept asking for 'glass o watere'"[8] (Agnant 39). Jérémie's statement both mocks and laments that situation. Jérémie s judgment regarding his uncle's loss of identity expressed through his inability to retain something as inherently Haitian as the Creole language is one of the most evident manifestations of Haitian cultural value and pride. Zéphir points out this fact when she writes:

> [The] fact that Haitian immigrants have their own distinct language, Haitian Creole, unique to them, enables them to maintain their ethnicity and their sense of "peoplehood". Haitian Creole is a marker of Haitian immigrants' ethnolinguistic identity and contributes to their feeling of belonging to a proud cultural and linguistic heritage. (Zéphir 67)

The uncle's loss of identity, as told by Jérémie, centers on the loss of his ability to speak his native tongue. Jérémie is estranged and aggravated, not just by his uncle's loss of the language, but by his pollution of Haitian Creole (*Kreyòl*) when mixed with English, as seen in his request for water. The uncle's use of this mixed language shows a loss of identity in different levels: first, his detachment from the past living conditions in Haiti (where latrines could be called 'water-closets', hence the linguistic confusion reflected in the dialogue), and second, through his inability –or unwillingness—to make a simple request for water in Creole.

Jérémie is unable to comprehend why any Haitian would lose or pollute such an important source of national identity as *Kreyòl*, which is only spoken in Haiti. The loss of language suggests that the recent immigrant has stopped or severely reduced his or her use of Kreyòl due to reasons linked to either forced or willing assimilation. In the uncle's case, through his persistence in requesting water in English despite the fact that nobody could understand him, it can be inferred that he is willing to assimilate into the non-Haitian culture. In the eyes of Jérémie and Alexis, this constitutes the ultimate betrayal of identity.

Adrienne and Alexis both express the crucial value of national pride through their willingness to go as far as needed to defend their patriotic essence. It is this patriotism that has allowed their unique country to surmount any obstacles presented to them in the past. Both Alexis and Adrienne personify the desire for freedom and independence of the adults who are responsible for them. These adults must remain discreet and passive about their need to fight against oppression, slavery, exile and injustice either due to the colonial system (as in the case of Lamartine) or their asylum-seeker status (as in the case of Agnant).

In Lamartine's play, Adrienne is the muse that illuminates Toussaint's revolution. In the last scene of Lamartine's play, we see that for him, Adrienne is "the angel of blacks", an "angel of victory" (Lamartine 146). She is a child that personifies the future of the nation and is Toussaint's reason for fighting and for finally obliterating the chains of French imperialism on his country. Toussaint declares: "Oh, magnanimous child, you will be the warm blanket of my nights, the stick in my hands, the lamp of my path!"[9] (Lamartine 57). As Toussaint's

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[8] My translation from the original French, « Il parlait une langue étrange. Ce n'était pas le créole, mais un charabia que personne ne comprenait […] il s'était mis à demander : 'watere, watere'. Nous lui avions montré la cabane au fond de la cour, je veux dire, les latrines. Il continuait pourtant à réclamer 'glass o watere'" »

"lamp," Adrienne represents Haiti's children and the future of Saint-Domingue as an independent nation. The potential of the youth, represented by his niece Adrienne, and the desire for progress and development through them ultimately drives Toussaint to fight against the French empire, colonization, and oppression.

Adrienne is not the only character that serves as inspiration for the desire of freedom and a more prosperous future. Alexis states: "Mom pretends that we are in great danger […] Mom will not change her mind. Our life is in danger […] I would like to stay with grandma. But mom refuses. She says that the militias will not hesitate to take even children […] She is so disheartened, she keeps repeating that anywhere will be better than here!"[10] (Agnant 22). This quotation reveals Alexis' mother's final goal of escape to the United States. Although Alexis does not want to leave his country, grandmother, or best friend Jérémie, his mother is determined to flee Haiti at any cost, as long as she is able to protect her child and her child's future.

These two children, Adrienne and Alexis, symbolize the future, undying hope, and the promise of prosperity for Haiti. For this reason, they are fiercely defended and guarded by their elders. In defending the children as well as their values and morals, the very essence of Haiti is what is being upheld and protected. Alexis and Adrienne are a symbol of birth or rebirth (depending on the case) of the country. As a result, they must be firm, established in their values and convictions, but most of all, they must be proud of all the heritage and history they represent through their existence.

Despite the parallels and similarities between the two child characters, there is a monumental contrast in the destiny of each character within the texts: Adrienne dies while Alexis lives. However, their characters, especially their final and enduring actions, represent and personify the future of the nation at that moment in history. Both Adrienne and Alexis's actions carry later repercussions because they inspire and drive others to action. Adrienne's cry to arms and her subsequent death, as she was facing the French army, inspires Toussaint Louverture to take the final plunge into full-on revolution for independence. In the same way, Alexis's courage and leadership inside the camp motivated his fellow asylum-seekers to stand up against the imprisonment, the abuse and injustice that they felt in the camp. Even more importantly, the children remain eternal symbols of struggle and of revolution. No matter their fate (life or death), the struggle continues through their spirits.

At the end of *Toussaint Louverture*, the jarring image of Adrienne's death cements the idea of independence and revolution. As she faces the oncoming French army, her last words are: "To arms! […] May the folds of the flag fly over Haiti! All of you remember the life of those who have died standing against the whites!"[11] (Lamartine 146). After this dramatic scene, Adrienne faces the French soldiers and is subsequently killed as she raised the black distress flag, which had set the patriots' attack in motion (Cohen 256). She is the child that

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[9] My translation from the original French, « O magnanime enfant, tu seras de mes nuits le manteau réchauffant, le bâton de mes mains, la lampe de ma route ! »

[10] My translation from the original French, « Maman prétend que nous courons de grands dangers […] Maman ne changera pas d'idée. Notre vie est en danger […] Je voudrais rester avec grand-mère. Mais maman refuse. Elle dit que les miliciens n'hésitent pas à s'en prendre même aux enfants […] Elle est si découragée qu'elle répète que n'importe où sera mieux qu'ici ! »

[11] My translation from the original French, « Aux armes ! […] Que les plis du drapeau sur Haïti s'étendent! Vous, rappelez la vie àses membres tremblants et qu'il meure du moins debout devant les blancs ! »

symbolizes the incipient nation that is literally facing its occupiers. Toussaint cries: "Angel of victory and freedom!" (Lamartine 147). He is devastated but quickly takes this as fuel for his desire of freedom and finishes the dialogue by yelling "To arms!"[13] – echoing Adrienne's dying words (Lamartine 147).

Adrienne's freedom was being threatened by French imperialism and she fought against it until death. She becomes a martyr, but in the play, she is the key source to ignite the powerful ensuing revolution led by Toussaint. In this final scene, Adrienne's character takes on great significance, especially in the francophone consciousness, as she seems to parallel the French "Marianne". The symbol of "Marianne" came about in France during the years of the French Revolution, as accounts of a pretty young woman wearing a Phrygian cap rousing the "sans-culottes" (urban laborers, bulk of the Revolutionary army) became legendary. "Marianne" represents the triumph of the French Republic; she can be seen as an allegory for reason and liberty, as well as the personification of the values of the French state (Embassy of France in the United States). A close parallel figure in the United States could be "Lady Liberty", as it epitomizes the American ideals of freedom and multiculturalism.

Like Adrienne, Alexis's actions during his escape and later imprisonment inside the walls of an American refugee camp constitute a great example of the notion of the survival of the Haitian revolutionary spirit. Alexis's freedom is threatened in every way: by his government at the beginning of the novel, and by the oppressive circumstances of the refugee camps at the end. This pressure leads Alexis to develop a ferocious attitude that echoes Toussaint Louverture's personality. He has seen not only the horrible situation of his country but also the great injustice occurring in this new system, inside the refugee camps. Alexis feels cheated, trapped and this way, the spirit of revolution – much like Toussaint and Adrienne when she raises the flag — exudes from his soul during his final actions in the camp. "You have the semblance of a man now,"[14] Alexis's mother says.

Agnant's text illustrates Alexis's coming of age when he thinks about his father just before fleeing Haiti:

> In a history book, they admired the photo of an ancient slave, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who became emperor of Haiti […] On another page, a photo of Toussaint Louverture […] And his father … made him relive the seizing of Toussaint […] Alexis then perched on a chair, hand on his chest and yelled Toussaint's famous phrase: 'In overthrowing me, you have done no more than cut down the trunk of the tree of black liberty in Saint-Domingue. But it will spring back from the roots, for they are numerous and deep.' 'All that is really far away now,' Alexis thought.[15] (Agnant 84-85).

Even though Alexis was incredibly disappointed by the precarious situation of his

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[11] My translation from the original French, « Aux armes ! […] Que les plis du drapeau sur Haïti s'étendent! Vous, rappelez la vie àses membres tremblants et qu'il meure du moins debout devant les blancs ! »

[12] My translation from the original French, « Ange de la victoire et de la liberté ! »

[13] My translation from the original French, « Aux armes ! »

[14] My translation from the original French, « Tu as l'air d'un homme maintenant, »

[15] My translation from the original French, « Dans un livre d'histoire, ils admiraient la photo d'un ancien esclave, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, devenu empereur d'Haïti […] Sur une autre page, une photo de Toussaint Louverture […] Et son père … lui faisait revivre la capture de Toussaint […] Alexis alors se juchait sur une chaise, la main sur la poitrine, et déclamait cette phrase célèbre de Toussaint : 'En me renversant, on n'a abattu que le tronc de l'arbre de la liberté des Noirs. Mais il repoussera, car ses racines sont profondes et nombreuses'. 'Tout cela est bien loin maintenant,' pensa Alexis. »

country, he knew that was not part of the true Haitian essence. He was convinced that it was the spirit of great leaders like Dessalines and Louverture who comprised the spirit of his country, and not the tyrant dictators who threatened people like his father. Inspired by the images of the revolutionary leaders as well as by the suffering he had endured during his imprisonment in an American refugee camp, Alexis personifies the constant Haitian struggle for independence. Rather than succumb to the awful conditions and deprivations of the camp, he thinks about Louverture and the glory he brought to Haiti. Agnant describes Alexis' progressive spiritual growth and maturity as he realizes his nationalistic roots and his renaissance as a modern combatant who felt compelled to encourage and uphold the dignity of his fellow compatriots in the camp:

> [With a] voice of fire, voice of warrior, voice of thunder getting ready to release the tempest, he [Alexis] breathes without hearing all those voices around him, begging him to stop that racket […] His thinner body bends like a liana, while, with all his might, he breathes on the instrument that once, for the slaves, his ancestors, used to yell out –among the mountains—the battle cry for freedom[16] (Agnant 136, 142)

Alexis knows he has a revolutionary legacy in his blood, for he comes from a proud lineage of warriors that fought with everything they had against slavery and oppression. He reminisces about all those who struggled before him to give Haiti its independence, about those he left behind as he escaped the brutality of the Duvaliers, and about his fellow compatriots who were there in the camp with him dreaming of a brighter future. These memories incite him to become a leader to those in the camp and follow the example of Louverture and Dessalines.

At the end, Alexis turns and talks to Mathurin, another refugee who has helped during the crisis. In a poetic, realistic manner reminiscent of Toussaint Louverture, Alexis tells him: "We have not won the war, Mat, but we have just won a great battle, *Ayabombe*!"[17] (Agnant 142). This last word, "ayabombe", is derived from the Arawak/Taíno indigenous battle cry "Aji Ayabombe!", which means that one is better off dead than enslaved (The Taino People).

Today, the question of whether it is better off to be dead than enslaved remains relevant for Haiti. Despite years of political turmoil, social unrest caused by oppressive poverty, and the devastating hurricane season in 2008 that nearly turned Haiti into a wasteland, the situation seemed to be improving by the end of 2009. Food riots in 2008, resulting from the path of destruction left behind by four consecutive Atlantic storms that same year, prompted countries like the United States and Brazil to boost food aid and peacekeeping forces. After evaluating Haiti's progress in economic reform and poverty reduction, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund forgave 80 percent of the country's debt. Haiti was just beginning to gain stability with the support of the international community, and the country was taking significant steps towards democracy under the presidency of René Préval (BBC News).

Yet, nothing could prepare the small island nation for the catastrophic earthquake that

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[16] My translation from the original French, « Voix de feu, voix guerrière, voix de tonnerre qui s'apprête à déchainer la tempête, il [Alexis] souffle sans entendre toutes ces voix qui, autour de lui, le supplient de cesser ce vacarme […] Son corps amaigri se plie telle une liane, tandis que toutes ses forces, il souffle dans l'instrument qui jadis, pour les esclaves ses ancêtres, servait à lancer depuis les montagnes le cri de ralliement pour la liberté. »

[17] My translation from the original French, « Nous n'avons pas gagné la guerre, Mat, mais nous venons de remporter une grande bataille, Ayabombe ! »

struck Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010 and changed its fate forever. The loss of life, estimated at around 250,000, was an unprecedented and devastating blow to Haitian society on all levels: social, economic and psychological. Basic physical and governmental structures, as well as all sense of normalcy were obliterated following the quake, the worst in Haiti's 200 years of history. After the aftershocks passed and endless days of desperate rescue efforts went on, Haiti has had to struggle through unending crises: over a million homeless overcrowded in tent cities and the massive task of physical, political, and psychological recovery.

As if it were not enough, in November 2010, a severe cholera outbreak took the lives of more than 2,000 – a consequence of the precarious living conditions in Haiti after the quake. Cholera, commonly known as "the disease of the poor," highlighted the daunting amount of rehabilitation that Haiti requires. This intestinal infection is usually caused by the ingestion of bacteria present in water or food contaminated with feces. Symptoms in its more severe form include a sudden onset of acute watery diarrhea that can lead to death from extreme dehydration. The prevalence of cholera is generally linked to inadequate access to proper sanitation and clean water. (World Health Organization)

In the case of Haiti, basic sanitation infrastructures were razed by the earthquake. Since many homeless communities are now agglomerated in tent cities or just under tarps, there is no access to clean water for drinking, cooking, washing hands, or bathing. Under these conditions, the cholera virus thrives and spreads quickly, especially among children, the elderly, and those with depleted immune systems. Cholera can be prevented mostly by providing clean water and proper sanitation to vulnerable communities, as well as through health and food hygiene education (World Health Organization). A lack of hospitals, scarce and underdeveloped sanitation infrastructures, and delays in the arrival of aid began eroding the fortitude of the Haitian people.

Following the outbreak, the streets of Port-au-Prince and other urban areas in Haiti began showing signs of collective psychological distress, through anonymous graffiti stating "Nou bouke," Creole for "We are tired" (Cardona). Even long-term aid workers who have been committed to Haiti's progress for more than a decade, such as Dr. David Walton of U.S-based health organization "Partners in Health," echoed the communal sentiment. "It makes me frustrated. I can understand if there was another earthquake that happened. But cholera? You know, it seems like the insults never end," Walton said during an interview on *60 Minutes*. He repeated: "In Haiti, the insults never end." (60 Minutes). On top of the devastation that still remained 10 months after the quake, the virulent spread of cholera and its lethal consequences was proving to be almost unbearable for Haiti. People began blaming foreign United Nations stabilization troops for the spread of the disease, expressing their frustration in the form of riots and violence (Desvarieux). It seemed that Toussaint Louverture's fighting republic hit rock bottom.

However, despite these disheartening signs of national exhaustion, the actions and willpower of the Haitian people continue to tell another story: one of prevailing spirit, of dignity and pride, a story of hope and everlasting desire to push through again to freedom, as it did two centuries ago when black slaves fought tirelessly for their freedom from Napoleon and the French empire. As Toussaint Louverture declared, even though the trunk of the tree of liberty has been cut, it will grow once more, for its roots are deep and numerous. The

values of courage and struggle that have historically characterized Haitians are pushing the island through its darkest hour.

In their essay "Reckoning in Haiti: The State and Society since the Revolution," acclaimed Haitian historians Jean Casimir and Laurent Dubois assert that Haitians have remarkably organized and navigated the crisis without the assistance of the Haitian state. Moreover, Casimir and Dubois highlight the fact that Haiti does not need mere aid, but instead actual measures to truly empower its people, consistent with the indomitable spirit that has kept the nation afloat since its inception:

> A new kind of state and political order will emerge in Haiti only if the people are empowered. And they need to be empowered as they are. If far too many are poor and illiterate, they are no less ready to think and act for the future, just as their ancestors did during the Haitian Revolution. That revolution began an irreversible process that has constituted the political and social organization of Haiti today, which is the only foundation for the future. (131-133)

In spite of the earthquake, the cholera outbreak, the fragile government infrastructure, and the unfulfilled delivery of foreign aid, Haitians continue showing their determination to prevail. Haitian immigrants living in the United States keep sending remittances to their families, while those who stayed in Haiti keep dreaming of a democratic and stable outlook. While working to save as many Haitians as possible during the cholera outbreak, Dr. Walton remarked: "Look, we're gonna get through this. However we do it, we're gonna do it, but there is a way forward. We have to. There is no other way. We're not gonna lay down and die. It's gonna be slow. It's gonna be tough. It's gonna be agonizing. But we will make it through" (60 Minutes). This determination to persevere reflects the mindset of the Haitian population that has existed for centuries.

Despite their trials, the country is undergoing elections for a new president and there is a heightened sense of community in Haiti today. It is evident that Haitians believe in themselves and their ability to construct the bright future they deserve. In his essay "Art in the Time of Catastrophe," author Madison Smartt Bell discusses the importance of communal thought and action in Haiti's recovery. He asserts that it is this inherent value of community and collective struggle that will ultimately allow Haiti to rise from its ashes:

> The ordinary meaning of 'têt ansanm'[18] is comparatively mundane: cooperation of combined intelligence for the common good. In Haiti, it's an extraordinary force, one with which the First World is no longer familiar; the force which has brought and will bring Haiti back from the worst of disasters. (173)

Bell explains that, even linguistically through the use of an encompassing plural pronoun that can mean either "you" or "we" in *Kreyòl*, the Haitian mindset is rooted in community. During his time in Haiti, he said he experienced "a collective force" or a "shared unconscious" that constitutes a crucial source of strength and identity for the nation, despite the fact that this idea may seem foreign to people from the First World.

This collective force is displayed in Lamartine and Agnant's characters of Adrienne and Alexis. Although they acted alone, their individual actions began a communal chain reaction that eventually allowed the whole of the collective to overcome and triumph over its obstacles.

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[18] Haitian Creole expression for "the principle of working together"; if roughly translated into French, the expression could turn out as "têtes ensemble" or "heads together".

Adrienne and Alexis are much like Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, whose actions were the catalyst against oppression and injustice. The Haitian people are like these fictional and historical characters: they will once more dig deep into their historical roots and their revolutionary spirit to surmount obstacles and show the dignity of the first black republic in the world. It is precisely this notion of shared experience, shared efforts, and communal cooperation that allowed Haiti to gain its independence and will continue to ensure the slow yet sure recovery of the Haitian state and its people's spirit. As Bell confirms: "If we are here, it is WE who are here. Not just I"[19] (173).

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[19] My translation from the original Haitian Creole, "Si 'noula', se NOU ki la. Non sèlman 'mwen'"

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